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## Chapter 15

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### Sentence Building

#### The Foundation of Most Writing

The sentence is the foundation of prose writing. A thorough understanding of core sentence structure and sentence elements is essential to your success as a writer. This chapter will present some basic sentence-building guidelines.

## 15.1 Incorporating Core Sentence Components (Avoiding Fragments)

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize fragments.
2. Convert fragments to complete sentences.
3. Write complete sentences.

A complete sentence includes two core components: a **subject**<sup>1</sup> and a **predicate**<sup>2</sup>. **Fragments**<sup>3</sup> are essentially **dependent clauses**<sup>4</sup> that cannot stand on their own. They result when you attempt to write a sentence without one of those two core components. You can use these pointers to recognize fragments:

- When you read a sentence, ask yourself, “Who (or what) did what?” If you can answer that question, you are reading a sentence. If not, you are reading a fragment.

Test these examples:

Where are you?

*I am asking you where you are.*

*I can answer the question, so it's a sentence.*

Sandra ate lunch early.

*Sandra ate her lunch early.*

*I can answer the question, so it's a sentence.*

After the shelf came loose.

*Something happened after the shelf came loose, but I don't know what.*

*I can't answer the question, so it's a fragment.*

Fell near the door.

*I know something fell, but I don't know who or what fell.*

*I can't answer the question, so it's a fragment.*

1. The part of a sentence that includes the main idea noun or noun phrase.
2. The part of a sentence that includes the verb that carries the action of the sentence.
3. Words that are presented as a sentence but that do not include both a subject and a predicate.
4. A part of a sentence that presents an idea that cannot stand alone as a sentence.

- Fill in this blank with your sentence: Did you know that \_\_\_\_\_? If the completed question makes sense, you are reading a sentence. If it doesn't make sense, you are reading a fragment.

Test these examples:

Lost my earring.

*Did you know that lost my earring?*

*The test doesn't make sense, so the original is a fragment.*

The dog with the white paws near the gate.

*Did you know that the dog with the white paws near the gate?*

*The test doesn't make sense, so the original is a fragment.*

Someone left the window open.

*Did you know that someone left the window open?*

*The test makes sense, so the original is a sentence.*

Spaghetti squash is a great substitute for pasta.

*Did you know that spaghetti squash is a great substitute for pasta?*

*The test makes sense, so the original is a sentence.*

- When you have a group of sentences within a paragraph, read the sentences backward so that no sentence can gain information from the preceding sentence. This technique will help sentence fragments stand out since they will not make sense alone.

Ultimately all these pointers are designed to get you into the habit of asking whether your sentences stand on their own. If you have problems with writing fragments, perform these tests until recognizing what constitutes a sentence becomes second nature to you. When you recognize a fragment, you can turn it into sentence by adding the missing component. Try these examples:

- This fragment has no subject: Giggling and laughing all the way to school.

*One possible way to add a subject and turn this fragment into a sentence:*

*The girls were giggling and laughing all the way to school.*

- This fragment has no predicate: A brand new iPhone with all kinds of apps.

*One possible way to add a predicate and turn this fragment into a sentence:*

*A brand new iPhone with all kinds of apps isn't cheap!*

Just as sentences require a subject and a predicate, they also have boundaries. See [Chapter 18 "Punctuation", Section 18.3 "Eliminating Comma Splices and Fused Sentences"](#) and [Chapter 18 "Punctuation", Section 18.4 "Writing with Semicolons and Colons"](#) for guidelines on how to avoid fused sentences and comma splices and for options on how to punctuate between **independent clauses**<sup>5</sup>.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A sentence must have both a subject and a predicate.
- You can use some simple tests to check to see if an intended sentence is actually a fragment.

### EXERCISES

1. Choose three sentences from this section and remove the subjects to create fragments. Then replace the subjects with different subjects.
2. Choose three sentences from this section and remove the predicates to create fragments. Then replace the predicates with different predicates.
3. Decide whether each of the following items is a sentence or a fragment. For each fragment, identify whether the subject or predicate is missing and then rewrite each fragment so that it is a sentence.
  - a. Broke his leg when he fell off his bike.
  - b. Which way are you going to go?
  - c. With her long, dark hair; her flowing dress; and her high heels.
  - d. Walked for an hour after the rain started.
  - e. Beth lives east of the high school but north of where I live.

5. A part of a sentence that includes both a noun and a verb and can form a stand-alone sentence.

## 15.2 Choosing Appropriate Verb Tenses

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the simple verb tenses: past, present, and future.
2. Recognize the progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive verb tenses.
3. Correctly use the different verb tenses.

The **tense**<sup>6</sup> of a verb usually gives readers a sense of time. In other words, verb tense explains if the action in the sentence took place previously (past tense), is taking place right now (present tense), or will take place some time in the future (future tense). Tense also can indicate continual or recurring action (**progressive**<sup>7</sup>), action that has completely taken place as of a certain time (**perfect**<sup>8</sup>), and action that began in the past but continues or recurs through the present time (**perfect progressive**<sup>9</sup>).

6. The aspect of a verb that gives a sense of time (past, present, or future).

7. Continual or recurring action.

8. Action that took place as of a certain time.

9. Action that began in the past but continues or recurs in the present.

10. Whether a word is singular or plural.

11. Writing or speaking in which the speakers or writers refer to themselves using words such as “I,” “we,” and “us.”

12. Writing or speaking in which the reader is being spoken to using the word “you.”

13. Writing or speaking that references someone or something that is talked about using words such as “him,” “her,” “they,” “Sara,” and “dog.”

Verbs also have different forms for the different pronouns and **numbers**<sup>10</sup>. In other words, **first person**<sup>11</sup> (*I, we*) might require a different verb form from **second person**<sup>12</sup> (singular *you*, plural *you*) and **third person**<sup>13</sup> (*he, she, it, they*), and whether the pronoun is singular (*I, you, he, she, it*) or plural (*we, you, they*) can also make a difference in the verb form used.

Table 15.1 Verb Tenses for the Regular Verb “Look” and the Irregular Verb “Eat”

Tense	Number and Person	Past	Present	Future
<b>Simple</b>	<b>First-person singular</b>	I looked.	I look.	I will look.
		I ate.	I eat.	I will eat.
<b>Past: main verb + -ed or irregular variations</b>	<b>First-person plural</b>	We looked.	We look.	We will look.
		We ate.	We eat.	We will eat.
<b>Present: main verb</b>	<b>Second-person singular</b>	You looked.	You look.	You will look.
		You ate.	You eat.	You will eat.
	<b>Second-person plural</b>	You looked.	You look.	You will look.
		You ate.	You eat.	You will eat.

Tense	Number and Person	Past	Present	Future
<b>Future: will or shall + main verb</b>	<b>Third-person singular</b>	He looked.	He looks.	He will look.
		She ate.	She eats.	She will eat.
	<b>Third-person plural</b>	They looked.	They look.	They will look.
		They ate.	They eat.	They will eat.
<b>Progressive</b>  <b>Verb + -ing and a form of the verb “to be”</b>  <b>Past: was, were</b>  <b>Present: am, is, are</b>  <b>Future: will be</b>	<b>First-person singular</b>	I was looking.	I am looking.	I will be looking.
		I was eating.	I am eating.	I will be eating.
	<b>First-person plural</b>	We were looking.	We are looking.	We will be looking.
		We were eating.	We are eating.	We will be eating.
	<b>Second-person singular</b>	You were looking.	You are looking.	You will be eating.
		You were eating.	You are eating.	You will be looking.
	<b>Second-person plural</b>	You were eating.	You are eating.	You will be eating.
		You were looking.	You are looking.	You will be looking.
	<b>Third-person singular</b>	He was looking.	He is looking.	He will be looking.
		She was eating.	She is eating.	She will be eating.
	<b>Third-person plural</b>	They were looking.	They are looking.	They will be looking.
		They were eating.	They are eating.	They will be eating.
<b>Perfect</b>	<b>First-person singular</b>	I had looked.	I have looked.	I will have looked.
		I had eaten.	I have eaten.	I will have eaten.
	<b>First-person plural</b>	We had looked.	We have looked.	We will have looked.

Tense	Number and Person	Past	Present	Future
<b>Past participle and a form of the verb “to be”</b>  <b>Past: had</b>  <b>Present: has, have</b>  <b>Future: will have</b>		We had eaten.	We have eaten.	We will have eaten.
	<b>Second-person singular</b>	You had looked.	You have looked.	You will have looked.
		You had eaten.	You have eaten.	You will have eaten.
	<b>Second-person plural</b>	You had looked.	You have looked.	You will have looked.
		You had eaten.	You have eaten.	You will have eaten.
	<b>Third-person singular</b>	He had looked.	He has looked.	He will have looked.
		She had eaten.	She has eaten.	She will have eaten.
	<b>Third-person plural</b>	They had looked.	They have looked.	They will have looked.
They had eaten.		They have eaten.	They will have eaten.	
<b>Perfect progressive</b>  <b>Verb + -ing and a form of the verb “to be”</b>  <b>Past: had been</b>  <b>Present: has been, have been</b>  <b>Future: will have been</b>	<b>First-person singular</b>	I had been looking.	I have been looking.	I will have been looking.
		I had been eating.	I have been eating.	I will have been eating.
	<b>First-person plural</b>	We had been looking.	We have been looking.	We will have been looking.
		We had been eating.	We have been eating.	We will have been eating.
	<b>Second-person singular</b>	You had been looking.	You have been looking.	You will have been looking.
		You had been eating.	You have been eating.	You will have been eating.
	<b>Second-person plural</b>	You had been looking.	You have been looking.	You will have been looking.

Tense	Number and Person	Past	Present	Future
		You had been eating.	You have been eating.	You will have been eating.
	Third-person singular	He had been looking.	He has been looking.	He will have been looking.
		She had been eating.	She has been eating.	She will have been eating.
	Third-person plural	They had been looking.	They have been looking.	They will have been looking.
		They had been eating.	They have been eating.	They will have been eating.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The simple verb tenses are past, present, and future.
- Progressive tenses use a form of the verb “to be” along with the *-ing* form of the verb to indicate continual or recurring action.
- Perfect tenses use a form of the verb “to be” along with the past participle form of the verb to indicate action that took place before a certain time.
- Perfect progressive tenses use a form of the verb “to be” along with the *-ing* form of the verb to indicate action that began in the past and continues or recurs through the present time.

## EXERCISES

1. Identify the verb tense used in each of the following sentences:
  - a. I have heard that saying before.
  - b. Joey seemed uncomfortable when he was at my house yesterday.
  - c. You will be running in the second heat this afternoon.
  - d. Lois is writing a letter to the editor.
  - e. By ten o'clock tonight, we will have been walking for twenty hours.
2. Write three sentences using simple tense, three using progressive tense, three using perfect tense, and three using perfect progressive tense. Make sure to include each of the following variations at least once: past, present, future, first person, second person, third person, singular, and plural.

## 15.3 Making Sure Subjects and Verbs Agree

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Locate subjects and verbs in sentences.
2. Determine whether subjects and verbs agree in number and person.
3. Write sentences with proper agreement between the subjects and verbs.

By the time you reach college, you probably have a fairly well-developed sense of whether a sentence sounds right. In fact, that’s one of the main reasons why you should get into the habit of reading your drafts aloud before you submit them for peer or instructor review. Or better yet, ask a friend to read your draft back to you. You’ll be surprised how many careless errors you catch just from hearing them.

One key aspect that can make a sentence sound incorrect is if the subject and verb do not agree. In properly written sentences, the subjects and verbs must agree in number and person. Agreeing in number means that a plural subject is matched up with the plural form of the verb. Although the plural of a noun often ends in -s, it is the singular of a verb that usually ends in -s.

### Examples

The *rabbit hops* all around the cage. (singular subject and verb)

The *rabbits hop* all around the cage. (plural subject and verb)

Agreeing in person means, for example, a third-person noun must be matched with the proper third-person verb. This chart shows first, second, and third person for a few present-tense verbs. As you can see, most of the verbs are the same in all columns except for the third-person singular. The verb “to be” at the bottom also varies in the first-person singular column. So to match subjects and verbs by person, you could choose, for example, to say “I am,” but not “I are.”

Table 15.2 A Few Present-Tense Verbs

First-Person Singular: I	First-Person Plural: We	Second-Person Singular: You	Second-Person Plural: You	Third-Person Singular: He, She, It	Third-Person Plural: They
walk	walk	walk	walk	walks	walk
laugh	laugh	laugh	laugh	laughs	laugh
rattle	rattle	rattle	rattle	rattles	rattle
fall	fall	fall	fall	falls	fall
think	think	think	think	thinks	think
am	are	are	are	is	are

### Examples

It rattles when the wind blows. (third-person subject and verb)

I think I am a funny person. (first-person subject and verb)

Each of the following sentences represents a common type of **agreement error**. An *explanation* and a *correction* of the error follow each example:

1. Pete and Tara is siblings.

*A subject that includes the word “and” usually takes a plural verb even if the two nouns are singular.*

The sentence should read “Pete and Tara *are* siblings.”

2. Biscuits and gravy are my favorite breakfast.

*Sometimes the word and connects two words that form a subject and are actually one thing. In this case, “biscuits and gravy” is one dish. So even though there are two nouns connected by the word “and,” it is a singular subject and should take a singular verb.*

The sentence should read “Biscuits and gravy *is* my favorite breakfast.”

3. The women who works here are treated well.

**Relative pronouns**<sup>14</sup> (*that, who, and which*) can be singular or plural, depending on their antecedents (the words they stand for). The pronoun has the same number as the antecedent. In this case, “who” stands for “women” and “women” is plural, so the verb should be plural.

The sentence should read “The women who work here are treated well.”

4. One of the girls sing in the chorus.

A singular subject is separated by a phrase that ends with a plural noun. This pattern leads people to think that the plural noun (“girls” in this case) is the subject to which they should match the verb. But in reality, the verb (“sing”) must match the singular subject (“one”).

The sentence should read “One of the girls sings in the chorus.”

5. The data is unclear.

The words “data” and “media” are both considered plural at all times when used in academic writing. In more casual writing, some people use a singular version of the two words.

The sentence should read “The data are unclear.”

6. The basketball players with the most press this month is the college men playing in the Final Four tournament.

In some sentences, like this one, the verb comes before the subject. The word order can cause confusion, so you have to find the subject and verb and make sure they match.

The sentence should read “The basketball players with the most press this month are the college men playing in the Final Four tournament.”

7. I is ready to go.

A subject and verb must agree in person. In this case, “I” is a first-person noun, but “is” is a third-person verb.

The sentence should read “I am ready to go.”

8. What we think are that Clyde Delber should resign immediately.

Words that begin with “what” can take either a singular or a plural verb depending on whether “what” is understood as singular or plural. In this case,

14. Word used to introduce a subordinate clause (e.g., that, what, which, who).

*“we” collectively think one thing, so the verb should be singular even though “we” is plural.*

The sentence should read “What we think is that Clyde Delber should resign immediately.”

9. Either the dog or the cats spends time on this window seat when I’m gone.

*The word “or” usually indicates a singular subject even though you see two nouns. This sentence is an exception to this guideline because at least one of the subjects is plural. When this happens, the verb should agree with the subject to which it is closest.*

The sentence should read “Either the dog or the cats *spend* time on this window seat when I’m gone.”

10. Molly or Huck keep the books for the club, so one of them will know.

*The word “or” usually indicates a singular subject even though you see two nouns. An exception to this guideline is that if one of the subjects is plural, the verb should agree with the subject to which it is closest.*

The sentence should read “Molly or Huck *keeps* the books for the club, so one of them will know.

11. The wilderness scare me when I think of going out alone.

*When a singular noun ends with an -s, you might get confused and think it is a plural noun.*

The sentence should read “The wilderness *scares* me when I think of going out alone.”

12. Each of the girls are happy to be here.

*Indefinite pronouns (anyone, each, either, everybody, and everyone) are always singular. So they have to always be used with singular verbs.*

The sentence should read “Each of the girls *is* happy to be here.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- You have to be able to identify the subject and verb within a sentence to know for sure that they agree.
- Some sentence formats make it easy to choose an incorrect verb. Knowing these types of sentence formats can help you be alert so you can avoid these common problems.
- Since a surprisingly high percentage of agreement errors come from carelessness and a failure to proofread, you should get into the habit of reading your drafts aloud to listen for constructions that don't sound right.

## EXERCISES

1. Write one sentence showing the correct use of each of the guidelines presented in the tips within this section. (twelve total sentences)
2. Mark the subject and verb in each of the following sentences. Then identify the number and person for each subject/verb combination.
  - a. We remember them every year at this time.
  - b. The media are hungry for anything that sells news.
  - c. You dance like someone who has had a lot of training.
  - d. Denver or Salt Lake City sells the most of our ice sculptures each year.
  - e. I, of all your siblings, am least likely to judge you.
3. These sentences have number errors, person errors, or both. Rewrite each sentence so that it is error free.
  - a. The people in the town supports the local theater.
  - b. Five cups are enough for a double recipe.
  - c. Anna and Jonah runs after classes each day.
  - d. The luckiest group was the math students who took the test first hour.
  - e. Everybody are glad to help in a situation like this one.

## 15.4 Avoiding Misplaced Modifiers, Dangling Modifiers, and Split Infinitives

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers, and split infinitives.
2. Correct misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers, and split infinitives.
3. Write sentences that do not include misplaced modifiers, dangling modifiers, and split infinitives.

Consider this sentence: “For her birthday, Megan received an attractive woman’s briefcase.” The modifier “attractive” is in an awkward position. The person who wrote this sentence most likely intended to suggest that the briefcase was attractive. However, people reading it or listening to it might easily assume that the briefcase was intended for (or already belonged to) an attractive woman.

Three categories of modifier problems include **misplaced modifiers**<sup>15</sup>, **dangling modifiers**<sup>16</sup>, and **split infinitives**<sup>17</sup>. These three categories, explained in the following subsections, are all similar because they all involve misplacing words or phrases. Understanding the differences between these categories should help you be on the lookout for such mistakes in your writing and that of your peers.

### Misplaced Modifiers

The easiest way to clarify which word is being modified in a sentence is to place the modifier close to the word it modifies. Whenever possible, it is best to place a modifier immediately before or after the modified word.

15. A modifier that has an awkward, confusing position within a sentence.

16. A modifier that is placed within a sentence in a way that makes it seem as though it modifies a noun other than the one intended.

17. The placement of a word between “to” and a verb (e.g., “to actually grow”).

Read the following example of a **misplaced modifier**, note the point of confusion, and review the *correction*.

### Example 1

The malfunctioning student's phone beeped during class.

**Misplaced modifier:** “malfunctioning”

**Modifying link:** “phone” (not “student”)

**Point of confusion:** The writer wants to say that the student had a malfunctioning phone that beeped during class, not that the student was malfunctioning.

**Rewritten link:** *The student's malfunctioning phone beeped during class.*

### Dangling Modifiers

Often a dangling modifier modifies the subject of a sentence, but the placement of the modifier makes it seem as though it modifies another noun in the sentence. Other times, a dangling modifier actually modifies someone or something other than the subject of the sentence, but the wording makes it appear as though the dangling modifier modifies the subject. The resulting image conveyed can often be rather confusing, humorous, or just embarrassing.

Read the following examples of **dangling modifiers**, note the point of confusion in each case, and review the *possible corrections*. Note that there is often more than one correct way to rewrite each sentence.

### Example 1

The child was climbing the fence that always seemed adventuresome.

**Misplaced modifier:** “that always seemed adventuresome”

**Modifying link:** “child” (not “fence”)

**Point of confusion:** The wording makes it sound as if the fence is adventuresome, not the child.

**Rewritten link:**

*The child, who always seemed adventuresome, was climbing the fence.*

OR

*The adventuresome child was climbing the fence.*

## Example 2

Reading in the porch swing, giant mosquitoes attacked me.

**Misplaced modifier:** “Reading in the porch swing”

**Modifying link:** Implicit “I” (not “mosquitoes”)

**Point of confusion:** The wording makes the sentence sound as if the mosquitoes are reading on the porch swing, not the speaker.

**Rewritten link:**

*While I was reading on the porch swing, giant mosquitoes attacked me.*

OR

*Giant mosquitoes attacked me while I was reading on the porch swing.*

### Example 3

After being found in the washing machine, the dog eagerly played with his favorite chew toy.

**Misplaced modifier:** “After being found in the washing machine”

**Modifying link:** “toy” (not “dog”)

**Point of confusion:** This sentence is supposed to say that the toy, not the dog, was found in the washing machine.

**Rewritten link:**

*After the dog’s favorite chew toy was found in the washing machine, he eagerly played with it.*

OR

*The dog eagerly played with his favorite chew toy after it was found in the washing machine.*

### Split Infinitives

Splitting infinitives refers to placing a word between “to” and a verb, as in “Miss Clark set out to clearly define the problem.” Technically, you should not place the word “clearly” between “to” and “define.” This grammar rule came about in the eighteenth century when people held Latin up as the language standard. Since Latin did not have two-word infinitives, such as “to define,” grammarians wanted to preserve the unity of the two-word infinitives in an effort to make English more Latin-like. The use of split infinitives, however, has become increasingly common over the decades (e.g., “to boldly go where no man has gone before”—*Star Trek*, 1966). In fact, split infinitives are gaining acceptance in professional and academic writing as well. For your purposes, knowing what split infinitives are will help you know your options as a writer.

### Example 1

I'm going **to quickly run** to the store so I'll be back when you get home.

**Infinitive link:** "to run"

**Splitter link:** "quickly"

**Rewritten link:** *I'm going to run to the store quickly so I'll be back when you get home.*

### Example 2

Helen thought Mr. Beed said **to loudly sing**, but he actually said **to proudly sing**.

**Infinitive link:** "to sing" (twice)

**Splitter link:** "loudly"; "proudly"

**Rewritten link:** *Helen thought Mr. Beed said to sing loudly, but he actually said to sing proudly.*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Misplaced modifiers can cloud the meaning of a sentence due to poor placement of key phrases within the sentence.
- Dangling modifiers attribute a description to the wrong noun because of being placed in the wrong place in a sentence.
- Split infinitives are acceptable in many writing situations, but you should understand them so you can avoid them when you need to.

## EXERCISES

1. Each of the following sentences has a misplaced modifier, dangling modifier, or split infinitive. Identify each occurrence and then rewrite the sentences to eliminate the modifier problems and the split infinitives.
  - a. While eating lunch, a mouse ran by my foot.
  - b. A kid ran by, leading a bulldog wearing a ball uniform.
  - c. Alex decided to calmly ask for a raise.
  - d. Hopping around the backyard, I saw a tiny bunny.
  - e. While typing my paper, the computer froze.
  
2. Write a sentence that includes the following ideas. Make sure not to include any misplaced or dangling modifiers.
  - you finished the main course
  - you ate pie and ice cream for dessert
  - you ate the dessert after the main course
  
3. Write a sentence that includes the following ideas. Make sure not to include any split infinitives.
  - to complete
  - definitely
  - my homework
  - by tonight

## 15.5 Preventing Mixed Constructions

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize sentences with mixed construction problems.
2. Correct sentences with mixed construction problems.

Switching grammatical direction midway through a sentence can result in writing **mixed constructions**<sup>18</sup>, which make a sentence difficult to understand. Mixed constructions often take place when you start out a sentence with a thought, shift your thinking midway through it, and then fail to reread your completed or revised thought upon completing the sentence. Another common cause of mixed constructions is the revision process itself, especially as it occurs in word processing. When you are proofreading and making changes, it is easy to change a part of a sentence without realizing that the change does not mesh with the rest of the construction. Sometimes mixed construction sentences can be fixed by moving words around, adding words to the sentence, or both. Other times, the best repair is to turn the sentence into two or more sentences.

Look at the following examples of mixed constructions, and consider the confusion that could result.

### Example 1

**Stripping, sanding, and painting, I will turn this chest into a real treasure.**

Correction

*Stripping, sanding, and painting this chest will turn it into a real treasure.*

OR

*This chest will turn into a real treasure once I've stripped, sanded, and painted it.*

18. A switch in grammatical direction midway through a sentence.

### Example 2

**Although the swimmers practiced twice a day, lost their first six meets.**

Correction

*Although the swimmers practiced twice a day, the team still lost its first six meets.*

OR

*The swimmers practiced twice a day, but the team still lost its first six meets.*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Starting a sentence with one grammatical format and ending with another creates an awkward mixed construction that does not work.
- You can usually avoid mixed construction problems by proofreading your finished work.
- Take extra care to read over each sentence as you are revising since the process of revision often results in mixed constructions.

### EXERCISE

1. Rewrite these sentences to eliminate the mixed constructions:
  - a. After the Bears won the basketball game, because they played their best ball of the season.
  - b. Whether in online or face-to-face classes, therefore college students can benefit from a teacher-free discussion area.
  - c. Police work requires an ability to handle difficult situations will probably do well in this type of work.

## 15.6 Connecting Pronouns and Antecedents Clearly

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize pronoun antecedents.
2. Identify antecedents as singular or plural.
3. Match antecedents and pronouns.

Matching a **pronoun**<sup>19</sup> with its **antecedent**<sup>20</sup> in terms of number (singular or plural) can be tricky, as evidenced in sentences like this one:

- Each student should do their own work.

Since student is singular, a singular pronoun must match with it. A correct, but rather clunky, version of the sentence is the following:

- Each student should do his or her own work.

To avoid pronoun and antecedent problems, you should take three steps:

1. Identify the antecedent.
2. Determine if the antecedent is singular or plural.
3. Make sure the antecedent and pronoun match, preferably by making both plural if possible.

### Antecedent Identification

The antecedent is the noun the pronoun represents in a sentence. When you see a pronoun, you should be able to understand its meaning by looking at the rest of the sentence. Look at the following sentence:

- The Smiths picked apples for hours, and they put them in large boxes.

The antecedent for “they” is “the Smiths.” The antecedent for “them” is “apples.”

19. A word that takes the place of a noun (e.g., he, her, they, it).

20. A word, usually a noun, to which a pronoun refers.

Read each of the following sentences and note the *antecedent* for each *pronoun*.

- LaBeth fell on the floor and found out *it* was harder than *she* thought.  
it—*floor*; she—*LaBeth*
- The women chatted as *they* jogged along with *their* pets.  
they—*the women*; their—*the women's*
- When Abe lost *his* gloves, *he* backtracked looking for *them*.  
his—*Abe's*; he—*Abe*; them—*gloves*

As sentences become more complicated or whole paragraphs are involved, identifying pronoun antecedents might also become more complicated. As long as pronouns and antecedents are used properly, however, you should be able to find the antecedent for each pronoun. Read the following sentences and note the *antecedent* for each *pronoun*.

The ancient Mayans targeted December 12, 2012, as a momentous day that marks the end of a 5,126-year era. Today scholars speculate about what the Mayans expected to happen on that day and if *they* (*the Mayans*) saw *it* (*December 12, 2012*) as a time for celebration or fear. Some say that the end of an era would have been a cause for celebration. Others view *it* (*December 12, 2012*) as an impending ominous situation due to *its* (*December 12, 2012's*) unknown nature. At any rate, *you* (*the reader*) can rest assured that many scholars will be paying attention as the upcoming date draws near.

### Singular versus Plural Antecedents

When you are writing and using pronouns and antecedents, begin by identifying whether the antecedent is singular or plural. As you can see by looking at the following table, making this determination is sometimes not as easy as it might seem.

Antecedent	Singular or Plural?	Explanation
dog	Singular	Common singular nouns function as singular antecedents.

Antecedent	Singular or Plural?	Explanation
singers	Plural	Common plural nouns function as plural antecedents.
everybody	Singular	Indefinite pronouns sometimes function as antecedents. Since they refer to nonspecific things or people, their number can be ambiguous. To solve this problem, indefinite pronouns are treated as singular. Other indefinite pronouns include anyone, each, everyone, someone, and something.
team	Singular	Words that stand for one group are singular even though the group includes plural members.
team members	Plural	By very definition, the members in a group number more than one, so the term is plural.
coat and hat	Plural	When two or more nouns are joined by “and,” they create a plural entity.
coat or hat	Singular	When two or more nouns are joined by “or,” the singular or plural determination of such an antecedent is based on the last-mentioned noun. In this case, “hat” is mentioned last and is singular. So the antecedent is singular.
coat or hats	Plural	Since the last-mentioned noun in this set is plural, as an antecedent this set would be plural.
coats or hat	Singular	Since the last-mentioned noun in this set is singular, as an antecedent this set would be singular, even though the set includes a plural noun. (Note: as a matter of style, try to avoid this arrangement by using the “singular or plural” sequence for your antecedents.)

### Antecedent and Pronoun Matches

Antecedents and pronouns need to match in terms of number (singular or plural) and gender. For purposes of clarity, try to keep a pronoun relatively close to its antecedent. When the antecedent is not immediately clear, make a change such as rearranging the words, changing from singular to plural, or replacing the pronoun with a noun. Each of the following sentences has an **antecedent/pronoun matching problem**. Read each sentence and think about the problem. Then check below each **example** for a *correction* and an explanation.

### Number (Singular or Plural)

**Original:** The **singer** kept a bottle of water under **their** stool.

**Revision:** Angela, the singer, kept a bottle of water under *her* stool.

**Explanation:** Since “singer” is singular, the pronoun must be singular. In this situation, to say “his or her” sounds odd, so the best choice would be to revise the sentence to clarify the gender of the singer.

**Original:** Each **student** should complete **their** registration for next semester by October 5.

**Revision:** *Students* should complete *their* registration for next semester by October 5.

**Explanation:** Often, as in this situation, the best solution is to switch the subject from singular to plural so you can avoid having to use “his or her.”

**Original:** **Everyone** should do what **they** think is best.

**Revision:** *Everyone* should do what *he or she* thinks is best.

OR

All *employees* should do what *they* think is best.

**Explanation:** Indefinite pronouns are treated as singular in the English language even when they have an intended plural meaning. You have to either use a singular pronoun or revise the sentence to eliminate the indefinite pronoun as the antecedent.

**Original:** To compete in the holiday tournament, the **team** took **their** first airline flight as a group.

**Revision:** To compete in the holiday tournament, the *team* took *its* first airline flight as a group.

**Explanation:** Collective nouns are singular since they represent, for example, one team, one crowd, or one family. Although the pronoun “it” is used for nonhuman reference, it can also be used to reference a singular collective noun that involves humans.

**Original:** Neither Cathy nor the Petersons wanted to give up **her** place in line.

**Revision:** *Neither Cathy nor the Petersons* wanted to give up *their* place in line.

**Explanation:** In situations involving “or” or “nor,” the antecedent must match the noun closest to the pronoun, which in this case is Petersons. Since Petersons is plural, the pronoun must be plural.

**Original:** The **dogs and the cat** ate all **its** food immediately.

**Revision:** *The dogs and the cat* ate all *their* food immediately.

**Explanation:** When joined by “and,” compound antecedents are plural and, therefore, take a plural pronoun.

## Gender

**Original:** Each **member** is responsible for **his** own dues and registration.

**Revision:** Each *member* is responsible for *his or her* own dues and registration.

OR

*Members* are responsible for *their* own dues and registration.

**Explanation:** Using “he,” “his,” or “him” as a universal singular pronoun is no longer acceptable. Either use both a masculine and a feminine pronoun as in the first revision or change the noun to plural and use a plural pronoun as in the second revision. Stylistically, pluralizing is preferable. See [Chapter 16 "Sentence Style"](#) for more on how to avoid sexist language.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Match pronouns and antecedents by number (singular or plural) and gender.
- Collective nouns and indefinite pronouns are both considered singular even when they appear to refer to multiple members or components.
- Turning a singular subject into a plural subject is often the best way to handle a number problem between a subject and a pronoun.

## EXERCISES

1. Paying attention to the world around you, find at least five examples of pronoun/antecedent errors. Show the error and explain why it is a problem.
2. Use each of these pronouns in a sentence with an antecedent: their, they, he, her, and it.
3. Rewrite the following sentences to eliminate the pronoun/antecedent agreement problems:
  - a. Ask any teacher and they will tell you that their students aren't thinking of anything but spring break.
  - b. I don't know when this letter or the five letters I received last week were written since there is no date on it.
  - c. Everyone should look at his own form and make sure they are completed correctly.